

The Skeletons of Paradise

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A newly-married couple, at the suggestion of the bridegroom, go to live for five years, alone, on an island, fancifully called "Paradise." When their friends call for them at the end of their "Robinson Crusoe," three skeletons are found on the island. His confession, found by the body of the bridegroom, tells what happened.



NE of them we found in a mound on the island shore. The second we found on a mound in the centre of the island; there were green vines laced through and through the bleached white bones, and its fingers were lying pressed close to its downturned eye-sockets. The third one we found buried a foot below the second, and between the ribs of the left side, there was a rusted hunting-knife.

My name is William North, and I am a lawyer. I was to Weydman Nokes, best friend, chief counsellor, and manager of affairs. Nokes was young, slender—almost fragile, dyspeptic, and a millionaire without relatives. He had run the gamut of luxuries rapidly. First had come the passion for popular sports; after that had come a mania for aeroplanes; then there followed in quick succession, relic-hunting, racing automobiles, fine horses, gambling, and yachting. I was just beginning to wonder what Nokes would do next, when my office door opened, and in stepped Nokes, to

answer for himself.

He dropped into a chair, drew off his gloves, placed his cane across his knees, and lit a cigarette before he spoke. Then he said to me boldly: "North, don't call me a fool. It won't do any good. I can't help it any more than I can help my hair being black or my eyes brown. I'm tired of everything, North. I've got to have something new. I'm going back a thousand years, North—I'm going to be a savage for five years."

"Delightful!" I sneered. I liked the boy. My patience with him was well nigh exhausted.

"Yes," smiled Nokes—"very. During my last winter's cruise in the tropics, I found a small and uninhabited island which is a paradise. I named it that—Paradise. Just that one word, and not Paradise Island, understand —Paradise." He rolled the word on his tongue as though it were a bit of honey. I stared, and he continued: "I can't go alone. I should lose my mind in the silences. I offered the sum of a hundred thousand to one of my friends after another, in

the effort to get a companion. Nothing doing—until Elva McEnnis found out. She agreed to marry me and go with me. It was a sacrifice. Her brother's in bad over somebody else's money—”

“Elva McEnnis!” I broke in, amazed. I knew her. A slim, reed-like creature with golden hair and sea-blue eyes and a sweet, pale, hyacinthine beauty. “Elva McEnnis a savage? Rot! She'd wilt like a violet. Mentally, a Brobdingnagian; physically, a Lilliputian. If you accept the sacrifice, you're—”

“Who asked for advice, North?” He spoke almost angrily. “Now listen. Take good care of my affairs. You see, I trust you, North. Five years from today, you must come for me. My yacht, the Ringdove, will take us down, and then be returned to you. Sell it, or keep it for your own use, as you like—I'm giving it to you.”

He left a paper telling me of the location of his Paradise, forced from me my word that I would say nothing of the affair, shook hands with me warmly, and departed. The next day he was quietly married. The morning following that, saw the Ringdove sail from the harbor, headed south.

A few weeks later, the yacht returned. I sold it, and added the proceeds to Nokes's already magnificent fortune. Then I settled myself to wait five of the longest years of my life; for, as I have said before, I liked Weydman Nokes immensely.

When the time was come, I gathered four of my friends, all of them trustworthy men, chartered a small steamer, and set sail for Paradise. We arrived in due time. A mound on the beach caught my

attention the moment I had put my feet on the shore, and I was afraid. But the person who had been buried there was certainly neither Nokes nor his wife, for the skeleton was more than six feet in length. We left it, and made haste toward the center of the island.

It was, in all truth, a Paradise. It was a place of flowers and palms, sweet odors and ripening fruits.

Soon we came upon a hut built of brush and covered with rotting tarpaulin. Inside we found a pile of rotting boughs, a mildewed skirt, a ragged yachting coat, and a strip of white cloth of very fine texture, the latter-named being covered with writing and dark-red spots.

Then my friend Jamieson gave a startled cry and dashed from the hut.

We followed him to a mound a few yards off, a mound that had at its head a crude wooden cross. Lying on this mound, with green vines twining about its bleached white bones, with its fingers pressed close to its downturned eyesockets, we found the second skeleton.

“She has died,” said Jamieson, huskily, “and he has grieved himself to death here in the silence. There is no doubt that he came to love her. She was worth it.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “she was worth it.”

When we disinterred the third skeleton, beneath the cross, we found a rusted hunting-knife between the ribs of its left side. It had been a thrust that had reached the heart. We viewed the thing with horror. John Sayler voiced the sentiments of us all

when he finally said:

“He has killed her. Indeed he did become a savage. The brute! He was my friend; but I say, ‘damn a man who could do it!’”

I said very angrily, “Amen!”

Perhaps Jamieson had the best head of us all. He put forth a hand and took from me the strip of blood-stained cloth.

“Wait ?” he protested. “Don’t condemn Nokes yet. There is a message here—and then the thing we found on the beach is to be reckoned with. Shall I read this, North?”

“If you please,” I answered.

The message was addressed to me. It follows:

“I’ll have to hurry, North, for I’m not to be blessed with much more of life. I’ll begin with New York, as I rightly should.

“When the yacht was almost ready to sail, I had a little quarrel with my skipper, and he left the vessel. I found a good navigator at the last minute, however, in the person of an Austrian named Burcoltz. He was a giant, this Burcoltz—a big, broad man, with yellowish hair and upturned mustache. I soon discovered that he was highly educated, and that he had in time past owned his own private yacht. He seemed a thorough gentleman. I explained to him that my wife and I were going to spend a few months on the island—a new thing in honeymoons, you know. We were put ashore late in the afternoon, Elva and I. The yacht . . .

(Here the message ran into one of the dark-red spots on the strip of cloth, and the writing became illegible. Jamieson took up the thread below the

spot.)

. . . long night. We went to the highest point on the island to watch the sun rise. It was so very still. We were in a world of our own. It was a most beautiful, most peaceful world. I put an arm about my wife’s waist. She seemed more fragile than ever, and I wanted to tell her that I really loved her; perhaps I should have told her, had I not been afraid that she would not believe me. Suddenly Elva pointed a finger toward the jungle below. I looked, and saw Burcoltz making his way toward us! I looked for the yacht, but it was nowhere to be seen, and I felt then, that a serpent had come to my Garden of Eden.

“Why are you here?” I cried to the giant Austrian.

He did not speak until he had come up to where we stood. I saw him look into my wife’s face, drinking in her frail beauty hungrily, and I thought I knew why he was there.

“I ran the Ringdove upon a reef, and she went down with all on board save me,” smiled Burcoltz. “Surely, you couldn’t expect a man to drown when he could save himself!”

And I knew that it was a lie.

The three of us had not been on the island a week before the Austrian was making love to Elva, in his violent, foreign way. Elva seemed to fear that the man would harm me. She repulsed his advances as mildly as she could. But that appeared to make Burcoltz but the more determined. And soon I began to hate Burcoltz as I have never hated a man before.

It was my slight build, my inferior strength, that kept me from attacking Bur-coltz with my club—oh,

yes, I had a club, and so did Burcoltz. One day, my whole body trembling with rage, I glared into the giant's eyes, and said to him insanely: "You must leave the island immediately. You have no business here. We do not want you."

Burcoltz shrugged his massive shoulders, and threw out his hands. You know, North, how those fellows do that. He twirled at his fierce mustache very calmly.

"How, I beg leave to ask," he said with stinging courtesy, "am I to leave the is-land? We have no boat. We have nothing of which to make a boat—nor have we tools, if we had the material. We are far from the lanes of ships. I will leave you if you will but show me the way."

There was no way. The serpent must remain in my Garden of Eden. I thought I should go mad. I had come to love my little wife very much. And she seemed to love me equally as well as I loved her. We . . .

(Again did the message run into one of the dark-red spots on the cloth. Jamieson passed over it nervously).

. . . and weary days. I was madly in love with my frail, sweet wife now. I deplored the fact that I had accepted her sacrifice. She smiled, kissed me, and said there was nothing to forgive.

"There is but one thing that makes me unhappy, dear," she said to me. "It is Burcoltz. I am afraid. He may kill you. Weydman. He has a hunting-knife—I saw it. What a pity you did not bring weapons!"

Late that night, Elva stole from our hut. I was sleeping, and I didn't know that she was gone until she

returned. She knelt beside me, kissed me, and put the Austrian's hunting-knife in my hands!

"Now, Weydman," she whispered to me, "Burcoltz has no weapon at all. He has nothing save an awkward club."

"But to knife a man," I chattered, "is so brutal! If this were only a gun, or—"

"My dear!" exclaimed Elva, caressing my hair tenderly, "are you not now a savage, a primitive man? There is no law here to prevent it. I hate the idea, too. But you must do it to preserve your own life. I love you, Weydman! Yes, or I could not tell you to do such a thing as this!"

I walked out into the bright moonlight. I turned the knife over and over, and watched it flash. I looked toward the little hut of brush in which Burcoltz slept. But I couldn't go down to kill him. I was not enough of a savage to kill a man in cold blood. I turned back to Elva and the knife fell from my hands. Elva stooped and picked it up.

One fine evening, I was standing on the rocky headland on the north shore, watching the sun set, when I saw my wife and Burcoltz walking along the smooth, sandy beach below. They were conversing in low tones, and I could not hear what they said. I became weak. I sank to the stones, gibbering foolishly. I resolved anew to kill the giant. I rose, and peered over the brink. Elva and Burcoltz were standing still thirty feet below me. I took up a stone the size of a man's head, and hurled it with all my might. It killed the Austrian!

Elva turned her face upward,

and it was very white.

"Thank heaven, Weydman!" she cried.

For the time being, I was a madman. I denounced her, cursed her. I told her, which, of course, was not true, that I had heard her making love to the Austrian. I paused for lack of breath, and glared down at her.

She smiled. "Of course, Weydman," she said sweetly, "I saw you standing there. I had to make love to him to keep him from seeing you while I led him here for you to kill him."

This made me very happy indeed. I felt that I could never make amends for my vile accusation. I hurried down, seized my wife and kissed her passionately. Then we made a hole in the sand, and buried the big man. And now I felt that I was a savage.

Several months passed. They were the happiest months of my life. All that has happened, and all that is to happen in my little, little future, cannot take away that fact. We had fruits to eat always, and fish whenever we wanted them, and the flowers never died. Elva ...

(Here another blood-spot interrupted.)

. . . looked at me with awful eyes.

"I won't deceive you any longer," she said harshly. "I loved Burcoltz! You are so puny. He was so big and strong. I begged you to attack Burcoltz, to give him a reason for killing you! Some day, Weydman, I shall kill you with this knife." She thrust the weapon back into her girdle. I know that she will keep her

word. Of the two of us, it is she—sweet, fragile, hyacinthine Elva—who is the savage. I still love her . . .

Thus ended the message. There was no bloodstain there. Jamieson looked up and spoke to me:

"She killed him while he was writing that he loved her! The spots on the cloth—she wiped her hands—"

"I understand," I interrupted.

But did I understand? Can any man understand? I have wondered and wondered since about the bone-fingers that were pressed closed to the downturned eye sockets.